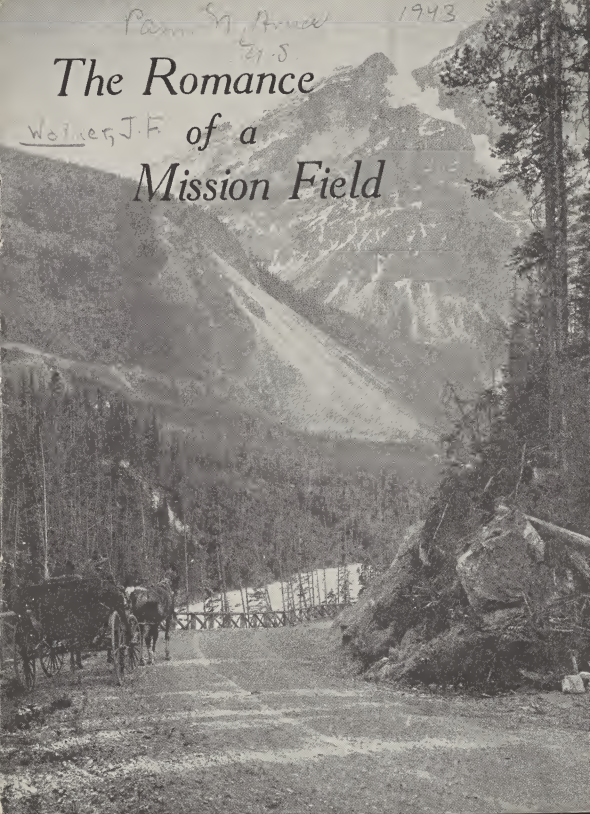


Pam. S. Bruce
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The Romance

Walter J. F. of a
Mission Field



THE ROMANCE OF A MISSION FIELD

By Rev. John F. Walker

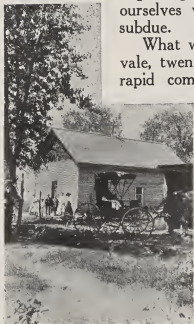
THE ROMANCE of the mission field" is a subject that admits of much latitude, especially if it is accepted in the light of the scriptural declaration that "the field is the world." A very small and somewhat isolated spot, however, has been selected to illustrate "romance" in connection with a home missionary field.

Possibly something of romance attaches to my early history, and may be the reason I habitually find myself on home missionary soil. In the late seventies and early eighties I knew what it was to live far from the centers of civilization. I knew what it was to drink in the atmosphere of freedom from the viewpoint of the Red Man and to live in his comradeship a year at a time without a companion of my own age or race. Later, the vanguard of civilization appeared, a vanguard that had left its religion on the other side of the Mississippi. I took my place in its midst and battled with the environment which it imposed. The time spent among the Indians is remembered with pleasure and it was also profitable in comparison with some of the years that followed. Well do I recollect the first missionary that came to our house. It was in winter and I had been making the rounds of my traps, dressed in buckskin and furs, and I returned home just as he was leaving. He took my hand and made some remarks suggesting that I might some day be a preacher. I had already known the heart hunger and the soul yearning for the things of God, and I said to myself: "If I ever do preach, I will go to those who live where preachers do not go and who are in a state of Gospel starvation."

Years passed. My early education was neglected, but

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at last came a vision, divinely born, and a desire to amend the wasted years. A brief attempt at home missionary work in South Dakota was followed by a long term of broken health, and finally, in the spring of 1910, I found myself facing a small empire of virgin and undeveloped resources in the state of Colorado. Religiously, it was unoccupied and unsurveyed. Yes, verily, the field is the world, and here, beginning life anew, Mrs. Walker and I found ourselves with more than our share of it to subdue.



Where the First Services Were
Held in Paradox Valley.

What was to be the line of attack? Redvale, twenty-eight miles beyond the zone of rapid communication, either by wire or rail, was the only place that offered an opening where we could establish our headquarters. We pitched our tent, literally a ten-ounce duck tent, twelve feet by fourteen, in the midst of an alfalfa field, on lots secured from the town site company for church purposes. Then we took our team of bronchos and the mountain buggy and began to drive. It was well that the buggy was a strong one, for we drove over mountain roads and mountains where there were no roads. We forded mountain streams and irrigation ditches until we could

tell more Ford stories than the average person who was the proud possessor of a modern flivver. The first year we drove an average of ten miles for each call that was made, and in all covered about five thousand miles. At the end of

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about two and a half years I had spent two hundred and seventy days in that buggy.

Rev. J. A. Becker, a former friend and pastor, was instrumental in bringing us to the Redvale field, and he assisted materially in the launching of the work. Within a few weeks we had the funds provided for the erection of a parsonage, including a loan of six hundred dollars from the Church Building Society. The work of erection was begun at once and pushed as rapidly as possible. In June, less than two months after our arrival, we attended our first association meeting, and reported a church organization of twenty-three charter members and a comfortable five-room parsonage already under roof.

We continued to live in the tent during the summer, and about the first of November moved into the parsonage which made a very cozy home for us for six years thereafter. During the summer the services were held in the parsonage, but when winter came we had to move from place to place, and by spring every one was willing to make some kind of sacrifice in order to have a place where we might worship unmolested and with some degree of comfort. The sacrifice was made, and in due season we had a little chapel that would accommodate about seventy persons. We dedicated this rude structure with appropriate services, and never did a



The Chapel at Redvale.

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building fill a greater need. It served as a meeting-place for almost every kind of a community gathering. We organized a new school district and for three years the chapel served as a schoolhouse during the week.

The next move was to get things started in Nucla. This place is fifteen miles northwest of Redvale, and there is a decided difference in the climate and the character of the soil. There is also a great difference in the character of the people. The place grew out of a colonization scheme that had its origin in Denver in 1894. The cooperative idea was the motive power that prompted the scheme. The colony was to have no distinctive political or religious character. The location for the working out of the plan was in the western portion of Montrose County on the Tabaguache Park. It was a great enterprise that involved the vision of a seer and the courage of a hero to undertake at all. The construction of an irrigation ditch eighteen miles long was necessary to conduct the waters of the San Miguel River down to the park which lies four hundred feet above the river. The people had before them a one-hundred-and-fifty-thousand-dollar job, and one hundred in the treasury with which to do it. The work began with seven men and two teams, and to-day, so far as the ditch is concerned, the dream is realized. There was before them a beautiful system of parks and mesas, covering some twenty thousand acres, which would be subject to irrigation by their system



The Collbran Field—the

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and would ultimately furnish homes for those who were able to weather the years of struggle and sacrifice that lay before them.

Pinon, on the San Miguel River, about midway of their ditch line, was selected as the location for colony headquarters. The cooperative idea appealed strongly to a certain class of Socialists, and they flocked thither in such

numbers that the original purpose of the colony was lost sight of, and Nucla and Pinon were commonly supposed to have been rank Socialist colonies from the time of their inception. The people worked hard, and no matter how much they differed, as they did radically, in their individual views, they were a unit for the accomplishment of the task that was before them. They had a common boarding house where all took their meals; they operated a common laundry and a dairy and sawmill in the same manner. They had a hall where they danced and met to debate questions that were of common interest. They formulated rules and



Church and Parsonage

laws that were to govern them, when some time in the golden future they should move down to the park. There was a very small minority of Christians in the colony who attempted and for a time carried on a Sunday School, but it was finally given up. As a sort of unwritten but mutual agreement they decreed that no saloon, lawyer or preacher should ever be tolerated in the colony or on the Park. The two former are still under the ban, but the home missionary has had the

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distinction of breaking through the anti-religious incrustation.

Now let us move down the line to the Park where the people, after the completion of the ditch, moved to their homesteads, pre-emptions and desert claims, and began the real work of home building. About

six years after the colonists moved from Pinon to the Park, Mrs. Walker and I drove into Nucla unknown and unannounced. We knew not a soul, not a name. I approached the first person I met on



Half-Way House on the Road to Denver.

the street, a woman, told her my business and inquired for some one who might be interested in religious matters. Mrs. Walker sat in the buggy near by, and while the weather was warm we both experienced a chill. A second advance brought better results, and we were given the names of three people, out in the country, who were said to be Christians. We started at once for the country, feeling a certain oppressiveness in the city atmosphere. We made two calls, and as I was approaching the third home the door opened and the lady of the house said, "I believe this is the preacher." She welcomed us with outstretched hands and smiling countenance. This was different, and I remarked that I did not realize my brand was so in evidence. We secured, not without protest, the use of the schoolhouse for preaching services, and thus the work began.

After making a survey of the field we found that about

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every sect or cult that could be thought of, and some that we had never heard of, was represented. There were also a few post graduates of evangelical churches. All were opposed to anything that savored of denominationalism. The problem of how best to conduct the work was demanding my serious attention, when suddenly, before I dared to hope for such a thing, I received a request, signed by about fifteen persons, to come to Nucla and organize a "Congregational Class." I took them at their word, and the meeting for organization was held in the very stronghold of the antis, the dance hall.

Paradox is seventy-five miles from the railroad and forty-five miles west of Redvale. It had been the home of the cow man, but at the time of our first visit it was rapidly being settled by "newcomers." We received a very cordial welcome. I shall never forget one home we visited. The husband was out in the yard, and he called to his wife and informed her of our mission.

She was a small woman, but she had a wonderful command of English, and as she hastened toward us she said: "Get right out, get right out and come into the house. Ed, you put their horses into the barn, for they are going to stay right



Adobe Houses in the Paradox Valley

here tonight and as much longer as we can keep them. I just heard there was a preacher in Redvale, and I was going to write you and tell you that you must come over and help us." The appeal was touching. We es-

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tablished a regular preaching date once in two weeks, and kept the meetings up during the first summer. In the fall we held special meetings for a week. If the reader could have looked in on one of those evening services he would have seen a dimly-lighted room, inadequately supplied with old-fashioned school desks. A few kerosene lamps furnished light for the speaker's desk and the organ. In the rear, to the right, on the window casing hung a dash lantern, with one or two other lanterns in different parts of the room. To complete the lighting plant a dozen candles were distributed about, fastened to the desks in their own tallow.

It has been said of Paradox that it was such a healthy place no one ever died there, and finally they had to kill a man in order to start a graveyard. I stood at the open grave of the "deceased," who "died with his boots on," while the mourners formed three separate groups about the grave, none on speaking terms with the other.

My first wedding in the Paradox country was to marry the great-granddaughter of John D. Lee, of Mountain Meadow fame, to a young cowpuncher. The bride's father was hung for murder on the day her mother married her second husband. The history of the Lee family, from John D. down to the present time, is written in blood. Later I sought out the home of the bride's mother, going eight miles into the mountain fastnesses, over a rugged and dangerous trail, and was received with genuine frontier hospitality. I preached the Gospel in that Mormon home, and I leave it to you to decide whether it was romantic or miraculous that on my second visit I baptized four children of a family living farther up the creek whose parents had been reared in the Mormon faith.

For six and one-half years we labored in this field and a brief summing up of the work would tabulate about as follows: Three churches and nine Sunday Schools organized

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and seven preaching points established. In five years the missionary bronchos travelled twenty-five thousand miles, but the last year's travel was done with a Ford. Several new places were clamoring for preaching services, the work already established was more than we could care for, and it was impossible to add to the program. I was compelled to recognize my physical limitations, as the constant strain was beginning to tell on my health. I therefore moved into a homestead seven and a half miles from Redvale, where we were quite as much isolated as many of the people to whom I had been striving to carry Gospel privileges. For three years prior to this my father had made his home with us, and here he answered the final summons. The funeral services were held at Redvale and were in charge of my successor.

When I resigned I thought that my ministrations as a missionary were ended. Before many months had passed, however, Mrs. Walker and I agreed that it seemed very selfish to live, apparently at least, for purely material things. We felt actually lost while we were not under the commission of the Home Missionary Society. This feeling intensified, until, in the following December, we found ourselves in charge of the Collbran parish and once more in harness.



The Congregational Home Missionary Society
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